

*Where Has All the Music Gone?  
Reflections on the Fortieth Anniversary  
of Fiji's Independence*

*Brij V Lal*

On the whole it is better to explore history rather than to repress or deny it.

EDWARD SAID, *Culture and Imperialism*

It is not enough to stand at a tangent of other peoples' conventions; we should be the most unforgiving critics of our own.

TONY JUDT, "ON BEING AUSTERE AND  
BEING JEWISH"

[There is a] difference between the silence after the music, and the silence when there is no music.

VINCENT O'SULLIVAN, IN  
*John Mansfield Thompson:  
Notes towards a Biography*

On 10 October 2010, Fiji marked the fortieth anniversary of its independence from the United Kingdom after ninety-six years of colonial rule. It was a predictably subdued affair. The guest of honor, Sir Michael Somare of Papua New Guinea, failed to turn up for the celebrations. There was in truth little to celebrate. The Public Emergency Regulations in place since April 2009, when the constitution of the country was abrogated, severely curtailed mobility and free speech, threatening retribution to anyone who questioned the conventional wisdom of the day—all this in marked contrast to the joy and (misplaced) optimism that attended the severance of

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the colonial umbilical cord in 1970. What a tumultuous forty years it has been in the ill-fated history of that otherwise richly endowed country: coups and constitutional crises, state-sponsored constitutional engineering, more coups, and endless cul-de-sacs. The prospect of stability, peace, and prosperity at the time of independence—the sense that Fiji, as a multiethnic society, might have a lesson to teach similarly situated countries in the developing world at the end of colonial rule—seems like a dream now. What was once thought to be the fate only of newly independent countries in Africa and Latin America whose fledgling democratic values were regularly subverted by the military in the name of good governance has now become an integral part of Fiji's postcolonial narrative. And there is no end in sight to its unpredictable future.

I was in my final year of high school when Fiji became independent. I remember the occasion vividly. Lollies were distributed at the morning assembly along with miniature plastic navy blue Fiji flags; the Union Jack came down for the last time as we dutifully recited "God Save the Queen" for the last time; speeches were made by Mr Sukru Rehman, chairman of the school's Board of Governors, and by the District Commissioner Mr Dodds; and words were spoken about achieving independence with tolerance, harmony, and justice and about the legacy the British were leaving us: a sense of fair play, the rule of law, and the fundamentals of parliamentary democracy. It was a quietly proud moment in our youthful lives, and we were told never to forget the wonderful legacy our colonial masters were bequeathing us. I did not know then that I would spend my entire life variously engaged with Fiji's history and politics. I am a part of the history I now seek to understand. I cannot and do not claim detachment or objectivity. But I will say that what I express is not entirely idiosyncratic, and that in some ample measure it reflects the opinion and experience of a section of the community from which I come and those of the generation of which I am a part. In the sounds of my footsteps, many would, I am sure, recognize the echoes of their own.

The late 1960s was one of the most dynamic periods in Fijian history, comparable in some senses to the 1990s, full of animated debate and discussion about what kind of political culture was appropriate for a multiethnic society such as Fiji (B Lal 1992). Opinion was genuinely divided. The National Federation Party (NFP), with its base in the Indo-Fijian community, advocated a nonracial common roll of voting with one person, one vote, one value. The Alliance Party, nominally multiracial but solidly backed by the Fijian and European communities, wanted nothing less than

the retention of full communal, that is, race-based rolls. The Federation wanted Fiji to become independent with an elected Fijian head of state, while the Alliance was lukewarm about independence and wanted ties to the British monarchy maintained. Questions were asked about such sensitive subjects as the role and place of traditional social and cultural institutions in the fabric of the wider society, and about the social, cultural, and institutional impediments to change and growth in Fijian society (Belshaw 1964; Spate 1959; Watters 1969).

These were questions that I came upon much later at university. In rural Labasa on the island of Vanua Levu, in a village without running water, paved roads, or electricity, where the radio was still a novelty in many households and newspapers were an expensive luxury only a few could afford, we lived largely in blissful ignorance. We had few means of finding out what was going on in the world. We had no contact with Fijians who lived on the outer edges of our settlement, no comprehension of their concerns, aspirations, and needs, just as they were innocent about ours. We were preoccupied with making do with what little we had, which was very little indeed. More than national politics, the affairs of the sugar industry, then under the mighty Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR), were of much greater concern to us. The sugar industry sustained us. It was our lifeblood. It was the reason we were in Fiji. The news of national politics came to us via the occasional Hindi newspapers such as *Jagriti*, *Shanti Dut*, and the *Fiji Samachar*. More immediately, it came through occasional visiting politicians—important men, impressively dressed, who talked about independence, about pride and sacrifice, about a new future, things that few of us actually understood or contemplated. That luxury was denied to us by our desperate economic situation. Our cane-growing village was solid NFP country; the Federation was “our party.” It had fought the CSR on our behalf. It carried our hopes and aspirations. There were a few Alliance supporters in the village, such as my eldest brother, because of whom I was sometimes taunted at school as a traitor to our community; but since such people were few and far between, they were generally tolerated as misguided men with misplaced loyalties, harmless.

At high school, politics was taboo, even in the higher grades. The colonial protocol of separating politics from education was strictly observed. It was as if nothing was happening in the country that truly mattered to us. In our school debates, we chose (or, rather our teachers chose for us) topics such as “Alcoholics should have no place in society” and “Why students should be allowed to wear thongs [flip-flops or slippers] to school,”

but nothing more serious (B Lal 2001). Politics was a dangerous, destabilizing territory, best left unexplored. The colonial educational bureaucracy kept a close, watchful eye on what went on in the classroom, and we were all focused on preparing for the final exam, which would determine our fate and our school's ranking in the colonial prestige system. In our history classes, we learned about the unification of Germany and Italy and about the causes and consequences of the First World War and the Russian Revolution, but nothing about Fiji itself, or the broader Pacific region, for that matter. Colonial rule was no longer fashionable and its defense was problematic. The irony is glaringly obvious now. There we were, people who would inherit the challenges and opportunities of independence, Fiji's next generation of leaders, completely unaware of important developments taking place all around us. And as products of largely mono-racial schools, we would be called on to play national leadership roles on a multi-racial stage for which we were spectacularly ill prepared. No wonder Fiji foundered on its postcolonial journey.

Fiji embarked on this postcolonial journey as we entered university. The opening of the University of the South Pacific in Suva must count as one of the turning points in modern South Pacific history, providing higher education to masses of students from poor homes who, before then, would have been deprived of the opportunities of tertiary education altogether. Higher education in colonial Fiji was the privilege of a selected elite: usually a dozen or so scholars sent to Australia and New Zealand to study "useful" subjects in preparation for careers in the teaching profession and in low-level administration. The university was for us an enlarging and enriching experience—but no more informative about what was going on in political circles in Fiji. Once again, we had our sports, hiking, social, and cultural clubs; we staged plays, read poetry, and went bushwalking, but serious discussion of politics was absent, or confined to a few individuals. The Indo-Fijians generally assumed that their Fijian counterparts were supporters of the Alliance Party while they, in turn, suspected us of being NFP sympathizers. Given that the political parties were essentially race-based, we were conscious of the ever-present danger that any criticism of a political party could easily be interpreted as a provocative attack on an ethnic group; and so the boundaries remained intact, and we kept our thoughts largely to ourselves.

Other Pacific Islands students, from Sāmoa, Tonga, the Cook Islands, and the Solomons, talked proudly of their history as beneficial and nourishing influences in their lives. They had a history to celebrate, which had

a coherence borne of ancient heritage or forged in response to colonial rule (the Mau movement in Sāmoa, Maasina Rule in Solomon Islands, the monarchy in Tonga). Their obvious pride in their national identity was a source of envy for us. We had no overarching sense of a common identity; we were “Indians” and “Fijians,” separate in our conceptions of the past and divergent in our understanding of the present. We hardly spoke each other’s language. Our memory was racially compartmentalized. While one group lauded the policies of colonial rule, the other rejected them. In our vision of what Fiji as a multiethnic society should be, we were poles apart, a disparity symbolized most immediately by our different attachments to communal and common roll systems of voting. Our traditions of political discourse were different: one was open and robust, the other hedged in by a careful observance of rituals and protocols of hierarchy. The space of common concerns was small, although social boundaries were freely breached in the lived experience of daily life. For us, history could not provide a serviceable ideology of nation building as it could and did for many of our Pacific neighbors. There was little we could agree on.

This was the unspoken reality on the ground, but our national myth evoked a different image. The early years of independence were warm and fuzzy. We had become independent without strife. Our links with the British monarchy remained intact. The old colonial pattern of political representation, with paramountcy for Fijians and privilege for Europeans, was maintained, and Indo-Fijians had to content themselves with the illusion of parity in the overall scheme of things. We were paraded before the world as a model of multiracial democracy. “The way the world should be,” Pope John Paul II had intoned on a fleeting visit to the country in 1985. That became our national mantra, shamelessly self-promotional. But deep inside us, I am not sure we really believed this myth. Independence had arrived peacefully, but none of the deep, underlying problems about power sharing, land leases, or the underpinnings of affirmative action had been resolved. We were reluctant to look into the abyss that separated us.

In truth, we had merely papered over the cracks and fractures that lay just beneath the surface. There were certain assumptions and understandings underpinning the independence order that lay unexplored lest we discover the hollowness that lay beneath the center of our public life. Race, we were repeatedly told, was a *fact* of life; in truth, it was on its way to becoming a *way* of life. Every issue of public policy came to be viewed through the prism of race. We were asked for our race when we opened

a bank account, applied for a driving license, or left or entered the country. In scholarship awards and public-service promotions, race became a consequential factor as part of the national equation of affirmative action. “Blood will flow,” Ratu Kamisese Mara said menacingly, if Fijian sensitivities about land and leadership were ever breached. Race serviced a convenient political ideology, but it was also deeply flawed. Neither the Fijians nor the Indo-Fijians were homogenous communities. That much was obvious to us. There were interests and concerns that transgressed communal boundaries in many parts of Fiji. Nonetheless, the overall architecture of national life was race-based.

Expatriate academic analysts scratched the surface and developed the theory of “Three Fijis” (Fisk 1970). There was some truth to this characterization, although fundamental structural changes in the economy were surreptitiously unsettling established orthodoxies. The Fijians were behind in some sectors but considerably ahead in others, such as ownership of land, timber, and marine resources. Affecting us most directly, the Fijian government of the day adopted an affirmative action policy in favor of indigenous Fijians in the field of education. An education commission in 1969 had recommended that 50 percent of all government scholarships be reserved for indigenous Fijians, with the unexpended funds designated specifically for Fijian educational projects (Sherlock and others 1969). Fijian disadvantage in education, and in the professions generally, was a direct result of the policies and visions of an earlier generation of Fijian leaders, principally Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna, who thought that the place for his people was in the subsistence sector in the villages, under the guidance of chiefly leadership, and that higher education was to remain the preserve of the chiefly elite (Sukuna 1984). In the abstract, the policy of racial balance made sense, but it was quite another matter at the personal level to see Fijian students getting scholarships for far lower marks than Indo-Fijian students. That policy of discrimination inevitably bred resentment. We felt as if we were the stepchildren of the state. In the civil service, senior Indo-Fijians stared blankly at the glass ceiling (B Lal 2010). The feeling of disappointment was muted, but it was real. A few years after independence, the warm mantra of multiracialism espoused by the leaders seemed strangely cold.

Things went from bad to worse after the mid-1970s. In 1974, Sakeasi Butadroka, former Alliance junior minister, founded the Fijian Nationalist Party with its motto, “Fiji for Fijians.” The following year, on the fifth anniversary of Fiji’s independence, he proposed a provocative motion in

Parliament to have the Indians deported from Fiji, with the expense of relocation to be paid by the British government (B Lal 1992, 235–238). In hindsight, the motion seems ludicrous, nothing more than a rhetorical flourish of the Fijian nationalist fringe. But at the time, it had a powerful, unsettling effect on us. In 1974, Idi Amin had expelled long-settled Indians from Uganda for no reason other than their industry and hard-earned prosperity. If it could happen in Uganda (and, earlier, in Burma), there was no obvious reason why it could not happen in Fiji. The Alliance government's political point-scoring response to the motion—condemning Butadroka but affirming support of the rights of all citizens, not only Indians, who were its specific targets—deepened our sense of alienation, especially when it became clear that the motion's sentiment, in varying degrees, was shared fairly widely in the Fijian community, according to Ratu David Toganivalu, himself a man of widespread cross-cultural friendships. For the first time, many Indo-Fijians began to feel that Fiji might not, after all, be their permanent home. Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's more liberal, skills-based migration policy opened doors that began to attract many. A gradual drift began.

Two years later, the tremors of the earthquake started by Butadroka were felt when the Alliance lost the general election in April 1977, with 25 percent of the Fijian votes going to the Nationalists. Five months later, the Alliance recaptured its natural constituency by effectively jettisoning its multiracial philosophy and embracing an openly ethnic one. The Alliance learned anew the truth of a central assumption that underpinned the independence settlement: that Fijians would remain in power so long as they remained united. Henceforth, the main preoccupation of the Alliance would be the preservation of Fijian ethnic solidarity. A similar consolidation was taking place on the Indo-Fijian side. Having won the April elections by the narrowest of margins (two seats), the National Federation Party tried for four days to form a coalition government with the Alliance, an offer that the party flatly refused. The dithering allowed the governor-general, Ratu Sir George Cakobau, to appoint a minority government headed by Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara. The NFP's delay in forming a government and its internal but well-publicized leadership skirmishes were blamed for this, but everyone knew privately that an "Indian" prime minister would not be acceptable to Fijians, proclamations of democratic principles and multiracial values notwithstanding (B Lal 2010). One by one, all the founding Indo-Fijian members of the Alliance party left or were forced to leave on one pretext or another, finding a welcoming home



in the NFP, headed by its new leader, Jai Ram Reddy. Reddy had not been part of the bitter ideological fights of the pre-independence era. He wanted all Indians united under one umbrella, precisely the goal that Ratu Mara had in mind for the Fijians. Racial polarization was almost complete. We could feel it in our bones.

In 1982, things nearly boiled over. Indo-Fijians had joined hands with some western Fijian leaders who were disgruntled with the Alliance government's development policies (especially about the lucrative pine industry), and they nearly succeeded in toppling the Fijian government. Racism raised its ugly head again. Calls were made to deport Indo-Fijian leaders, refuse renewal of leases to Indo-Fijian tenants unless they agreed to Fijian political control, and amend the constitution to enshrine Fijian paramountcy. Crises were manufactured and events staged to rouse people's emotions. Old-timers will remember the "Four Corners" program and the Carroll Report (B Lal 1983). Once again, the reluctance of the Fijian establishment to concede power or to share it except on its own terms was on full display. The tensions generated by the political debates percolated down to the grassroots, subtly influencing (and infecting) cross-cultural attitudes and perceptions. There was cordiality in public but a great deal of circumspection in private. Not everything, however, was as the Alliance narrative portrayed it to be. Villages and settlements were changing in significant ways as the tentacles of the modern cash economy reached the hitherto isolated sections of the community (Taylor 1987). Travel and technology were transforming urban attitudes and relationships. More and more children were attending multiracial schools, and people of all ethnicities were feeling the effects of a stalled economy and lengthened unemployment lines caused, in part, by World Bank-inspired policies. A multiracial working class was haphazardly in the making. Old polarities and binary oppositions were making less and less sense.

One result of the dissatisfaction with the existing orthodoxies and power arrangements in the country was the formation of a (nominally) multiracial Fiji Labour Party (FLP) in 1985. Rhetorically left leaning, it was in fact cautiously pragmatic, or pragmatically cautious, but its emergence posed a potential threat to the established order of things Fijian in which the conventional wisdom held that the business of leadership was the prerogative of chiefs. FLP criticism of the eastern chiefs who had dominated Fijian political discourse for much of the twentieth century caused further alarm in minds accustomed to deference and acquiescence to duly constituted authority. It came as little surprise that the Fiji Labour



Party–National Federation Party coalition, which won the 1987 general elections, was swiftly deposed by the Fijian military in the name of the “Fijian race.” I argued at the time that the coup was more than the simple racial contest it was made out to be by the supporters of the coup and by the international media, and that it was really about defeated politicians taking back power by any means possible (B Lal 1988). This narrative lacked traction in those emotionally charged days when “race” was the privileged explanatory factor of the coup.

The story of the 1987 coups is too well known to be retold here. The wounds it inflicted on the body politic, social fabric, and interethnic relations were profound and enduring. The daily harassment of people, the religious intolerance symbolized by the “Sunday Ban,” the nonrenewal of leases, and the rampant discrimination in the public service left a deep wound in the Indo-Fijian psyche. The sense of rejection and humiliation was deep—just how deep would become clear a few years later. I think I misjudged the depth of the hurt. The 1999 general elections were the first time that Sitiveni Rabuka had to seek Indo-Fijian support to govern. Under the 1990 Constitution, which was completely race-based, he only had to court the Fijian electorate, but there were twenty-five “Open” (that is, nonracial) seats under the 1997 Constitution (B Lal 1997).

The Indo-Fijians rejected his overtures for partnership in opening a new chapter in Fiji’s political evolution. All his achievements in helping give Fiji the most liberal constitution it ever had counted for little. I campaigned vigorously throughout the country for the Rabuka-Reddy coalition parties, explaining the contents of the new constitution, why it needed to be given time to prove its worth, and how it was paving the way for a new future for Fiji away from its preoccupation with the politics of race. To be sure, there were good reasons why the Rabuka government was unpopular: his administration was riddled with corruption, mismanagement, and scandals that nearly drove the country to the brink of bankruptcy. Politics of patronage were the order of the day. A new era was beckoning, I argued, but all this fell on deaf ears; the electorate wanted revenge and retribution. Rabuka had done something terribly wrong and he could not go unpunished. Mahendra Chaudhry, the Labour leader, understood the Indian psychology well and exploited it adeptly for his own purposes, even though it was his support that enabled Sitiveni Rabuka to become prime minister in 1992 in the first place. But, sadly, defeating Rabuka turned out to be a Pyrrhic victory for Chaudhry.

The 1987 coup sent an important message to the Indo-Fijian commu-

nity. As Rabuka said at the time, they could live in Fiji and make as much money as they wanted, but they should never aspire to political power, which should always remain in Fijian hands (Dean and Ritova 1988). The Indo-Fijian community was caught in a cul-de-sac. With very little to fall back on—the land leases were expiring at a rapid rate, discrimination was rampant in the public sector—many Indo-Fijians began to contemplate migration, which had started in earnest soon after the May military takeover. A trickle turned into a torrent. Precise figures are understandably uncertain, but a conservative estimate would put the numbers of those who left after the first coup at over 120,000. As a result, the proportion of the total population constituted by Indo-Fijians has declined from around 49 percent in 1987 to around 33 percent now. And the decline will continue well into the future through a continuously falling birthrate and unceasing migration (Chetty and Prasad 1993).

This huge demographic transformation is full of important implications. To start with, the fear of “Indian domination” that so plagued the dynamics of Fiji politics since the end of the Second World War, when the Indo-Fijians for the first time exceeded the indigenous Fijians, has gone forever. You can feel this in the texture and tenor of ordinary conversations with Fijians who know it in their hearts that Fiji is once again “their country.” This transformation has demonstrated the potential for the reconfiguration of Fiji politics. It has, for instance, opened up more space for democratic debate among Fijians about such sensitive topics as chiefly titles and inheritance in ways that would have been unimaginable during the reign of paramount chiefs in the early years of independence. In the 1990s, there was a proliferation of Fijian political parties, each with its own specific agenda, which opened up and reenergized the discussion of intra-Fijian issues (Durutalo 2000). The carefully nurtured artifact of “Fijian unity” was visibly fractured, both by the departure from the political stage of paramount chiefs who had once wielded overarching, unifying influence over their people and by the disappearance of traditional gatekeepers of knowledge and information by the advent of modern technology, including radio, television, the Internet, and the visual and print media. Fragmentation is going to be the future order of the day. “Race” has lost its edge in ordinary conversation and behavior.

Most of those who left the country were people of talent and education whose skills were in great demand overseas, especially in Australia and New Zealand: doctors, nurses, accountants, science teachers, mechanics, and businessmen. The best and the brightest have left, are leaving, or will

leave; on this there is general consensus. Among the migrants are members of my own family: three brothers in Brisbane, a sister in Darwin, and nieces, nephews, and cousins scattered across the globe. Those who remain in Fiji do so for reasons of business, lifestyle, or enduring commitment, but they have their families and their investments safely “parked” elsewhere (the word is theirs, not mine). Some who are overseas talk of retiring “back home,” but few so far have taken the opportunity, now on offer, of becoming permanent residents or citizens. They are keeping their options open—once bitten, twice shy. Among those leaving are people who in the normal course of events might have been expected to take a more moderate, longer-term view of the future. Their departure affected the power base of the National Federation Party, playing an important part in its downfall in the 1999 elections (B Lal 2010). Those who remained and who could not leave—unskilled workers, farmers, the elderly—had nothing to lose by demanding the sky and fell prey to the demagoguery and vaguely emancipating, empowering rhetoric of the Fiji Labour Party. Among those left in Fiji are the desperately poor with few hopes and little opportunity. They will continue to be vulnerable to the entreaties of opportunistic politicians preying on the needs and aspirations of the truly desperate. And the young will continue to migrate through family sponsorships, arranged marriages, or other means. Many are taking courses at tertiary institutions in the hope of improving their chances in the migration stakes.

The creation of the Fijian diaspora in Australia and New Zealand, in particular, is an important recent social phenomenon. We are not talking about “migrant communities” in the old sense of a rupture of a more or less permanent kind. They might more accurately be described as “trans-migrant” communities whose links with their former homelands are never severed but nurtured in a variety of novel ways. People maintain contact with friends and family back home through the Internet (e-mails, Facebook), through regular telephone conversations (via Skype), and through periodic visits. Air travel is not as prohibitively expensive as it once was, and physical proximity helps: Australia and New Zealand are just a few hours away by plane. People help with scholarships, refurbishment of temples and schools, medical supplies, and relief efforts during the natural calamities that visit Fiji with mundane regularity every year. Clusters form around places of origin in Fiji (Ba, Labasa) or around religious or cultural affiliation (Sangam, Muslim League, Sanatan Dharam, and Arya Samaj) to provide more targeted assistance in times of need. This sort of contribution is difficult to measure, but it is real and it is increasing. The

principle of gift giving is as much a part of this modern situation as it is of “traditional” societies much studied by anthropologists.

Many migrants left Fiji in emotionally difficult circumstances, giving up secure jobs that once held the prospect of promotion and permanency, selling homes and other property for a fraction of their normal price, rupturing relations built over generations, taking a journey into the unknown from which they knew there would be no return. The pain of dislocation is real, if never fully expressed. Understandably, their attitude toward those whose policies led to their displacement in the first place is suffused with a mixture of bitterness and deep anger. Many became strong supporters of the Fiji Labour Party and vocal critics of the more moderate and consensus-building strategies of its opponent, the National Federation Party. Jai Ram Reddy’s plea to make a fresh start, to let bygones be bygones, fell on deaf ears. Labour’s red-hot, punitive rhetoric was more to their liking. It came as little surprise that many Indo-Fijian residents in Australia and New Zealand also became vocal supporters of Frank Bainimarama’s December 2006 coup for a variety of motives, not the least of which was revenge. Fijians had caused a lot of misery for Indo-Fijians in the past, enthusiastically endorsing the nationalist rhetoric of previous coups. Now it was time for them to “taste their own medicine,” as the phrase goes in Fiji. Many are reluctant to believe anything but a positive narrative of the ongoing Fijian saga—that whatever the present state of affairs, Bainimarama will come good in the end. He therefore needs support, not opposition. Angered by my opposition to the latest coup, some Indo-Fijians in Sydney petitioned my vice-chancellor, Ian Chubb, to fire me from the Australian National University for my publicly aired and widely disseminated views.

While migration was proceeding apace, other developments in the 1980s and 1990s aided the alienation of the Indo-Fijian community in Fiji. Among them were the Rabuka government’s avowedly pro-Fijian policies, especially during its first term, when Rabuka seemed overtly indifferent to the concerns of the Indo-Fijians. He allocated government funds to enable Fijian landowning units to purchase freehold land on the market but appeared to do little to address the anxieties of Indo-Fijian tenants evicted from expiring leases. Scandals rocked the government. The economic rationalist policies of Finance Minister Jim Ah Koy affected all workers, Fijian and Indo-Fijian alike, especially at the lower levels. Jobs were lost and unemployment lines lengthened. The man who had committed the coup was now embarking on a course that was compounding Indo-Fijian misery.

The expiration of the thirty-year agricultural leases under the Agricultural Landlord and Tenant Act in the 1990s caused havoc in the Indo-Fijian farming community (P Lal 2009). Leases were not renewed partly because Fijian landowners themselves wanted to enter the industry in which until then they had been bystanders. But land was power, too: Fijian power. Around 83 percent of the land was owned in inalienable right by Fijians. People like Marika Qarikau, the Fijian nationalist manager of the Native Land Trust Board, realized this early and used land as a blunt instrument to extract maximum political concessions from the Indo-Fijians. Tenancies would be renewed, the message went out, if Indo-Fijians accepted the principle of Fijian political control. The threat of nonrenewal of leases came at a particularly inopportune time for struggling farmers: the ancient milling structures were collapsing, husbandry practices had deteriorated, tonnage per acre produced was low, and the preferential access to the European Union under the Lomé Agreement was about to expire. It was always in the nature of the leases that they would end one day, and the theoretical possibility was constantly in the back of growers' minds. But when it finally eventuated, the reality was different. The experience of being uprooted after generations of living in a place, seeing one's formerly productive farm revert to bush, and having to start afresh in a new occupation in a new place, often among complete strangers, was wrenching. It left many—including members of my own extended family—deeply traumatized and unforgiving of those whose policies had brought about their demise as cane growers.

Ironically, many positive things were happening in the country concurrently, the most important being the review of the racially lopsided 1990 Constitution, which Rabuka, along with Jai Ram Reddy, had played a genuinely important role in establishing. It was a courageous move, going against the grain of nationalist Fijian opinion, which was completely averse to any concession in the direction of political partnership with the Indo-Fijian community. The 1997 Constitution was a genuine improvement over its previous counterparts. There was limited but important movement in the direction of non-racialism. Race had been removed as a factor in affirmative action programs. The constitution had significant human rights provisions. Most importantly, the power-sharing arrangements of the constitution ensured that Indo-Fijians, if they won a sufficient number of seats in the House of Representatives, would as a matter of right, not charity, be entitled to an invitation into the cabinet. This is what the community had been struggling toward for nearly a century,

and the opportunity was now within its grasp. But constitutional reform counted for little in the countryside, which was emptying from the nonrenewal of leases, and in the mushrooming squatter settlements fringing the main urban centers of Fiji, where memories of deprivation and displacement were fresh and deep and the struggle for sustainable living getting more difficult by the day. The constitution won't put food on the table, opportunistic politicians told the people, who believed them. Among them was a former university academic, now a senior academic administrator: Mahendra Chaudhry.

Chaudhry's Fiji Labour Party was the clear beneficiary of the gradually growing reservoir of Indo-Fijian hurt and grievance (Fraenkel and Firth 2007). He won the 1999 general elections by annihilating his old enemy, the National Federation Party, which failed to win a single seat. Apart from anything else, the Indo-Fijian electorate was unforgiving of NFP's embracing of *Sitiveni Rabuka*. Grudges run deep in the Indo-Fijian psyche. But after a year in office, the Chaudhry government was toppled in a quasi-military coup led by the improbably self-styled Fijian nationalist George Speight. It was a dark moment for Fiji, but darker still for the Indo-Fijian community, which saw, yet again, a government elected by them overturned by force. It did not matter that the causes of the Speight insurrection were complex and had more to do with intra-Fijian rivalries and struggles for power. The overthrow simply reinforced the feelings of rejection and marginalization already well entrenched in the broader narrative of the Indo-Fijian experience in the postcolonial period. Chaudhry's fate might have been affected by his rather abrasive style (developed in the cauldron of Fiji's combative trade union movement), his ill-advised confrontation with the media, and his untimely and reportedly unilateral pursuit of policies of land reform, which could have been postponed to more propitious times; but all this was ignored. For many, it was enough that a prime minister of Indo-Fijian descent had been overthrown. Chaudhry, it should be emphasized, was not the cause of George Speight's insurrection, though he might have contributed to it unwittingly.

What followed made matters even worse, deepening Indo-Fijian disenchantment with the unfolding events. An interim administration was set up by the military and led by Laisenia Qarase, the merchant banker and former head of the Fiji Development Bank. This administration morphed into a new political party, the *Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua* (SDL), which won the general elections in 2001 and remained in power until 2006. The tragedy was that Qarase in his first term had not learned the

lessons of Fiji's recent history. Everything he did repudiated the spirit of consensus building of the 1990s. He openly courted the Fijian nationalist fringe to remain in power (Fraenkel, Firth, and Lal 2009). Qarase gave the Fiji Labour Party miniscule portfolios of no significance, which Labour rightly refused, seeking Supreme Court ruling on the numerical composition of the multiparty cabinet. The fundamental thrust of his government's policy was to address the concerns and needs of the indigenous Fijian community to the exclusion of virtually everything else. His reading of the Fijian scene was as dated as it was blinkered, premised on the notion that the Fijians were the disadvantaged community needing special assistance, while Indo-Fijians were the well-to-do ones—this when every piece of objective, verifiable evidence showed that poverty and disadvantage paid no respect to ethnic boundaries but freely transgressed them; that, indeed, rural Indo-Fijians comprised some of the most disadvantaged groups in Fiji society (as shown in various studies by Wadan Narsey, eg, Narsey 2008). Qarase's "Fijian Blueprint" promised massive assistance for specifically Fijian projects. His education policies directed special assistance to Fijian-run schools but not to Indian-run schools, even though many of them in urban areas had more Fijian students than Indian. The overall narrative of the first Qarase government was Fijian empowerment and Indo-Fijian disempowerment.

After the 2006 elections, looking ahead at his last term in Parliament and with an eye on his place in history, Qarase tried to make amends for his past errand, explicitly race-based politics. He now honored the spirit of the power-sharing provisions of the 1997 Constitution by giving Labour nine senior ministries in his cabinet. Labour ministers in the cabinet felt that there was a genuine effort to make power sharing work. Qarase himself was, as he told me, full of praise for his Labour colleagues in the cabinet. The mood among Indo-Fijians, and in the country at large, was buoyant, filled with optimism that at long last Fiji might be turning the corner of racially divisive confrontational politics. But by then, Mahendra Chaudhry, the Labour leader, was completely disaffected. He thought, unlike most other people in Fiji, that the 2006 elections had been rigged. I thought at the time, as I covered the campaign and the weeklong voting, that there may have been inconsistencies here and there, but nothing that would have changed the outcome of the election. As party leader, he wanted to allocate portfolios to his ministers, and he wanted them to be accountable to him rather than to the prime minister as the Westminster convention requires. This was crude politics designed to destabilize the



multiparty government. When his ministers balked, punishing them in the name of party solidarity became Chaudhry's prime concern, pursued relentlessly. At that point, the multiparty government was doomed.

Qarase did not help his cause by attempting to fulfill some of his controversial campaign promises, which could, and should, have been left for consideration later in the life of his government, if they were implemented at all. These included returning the ownership of the foreshore to the indigenous owners (the Qoliqoli Bill), which deeply angered developers, hoteliers, and non-Fijians generally; investigating the basis of land purchases in the nineteenth century with a view to returning illegally or fraudulently acquired lands to the traditional owners; and, most controversially, bypassing established judicial procedures to release from jail people convicted of coup-related crimes. The story is more complex than it is possible to discuss here, suffused with a variety of motives. None of the bills actually went before Parliament, but the damage to the government's reputation for probity and fairness was significant, providing its critics with powerful ammunition. Among these critics was Commodore Frank Bainimarama, the head of the Fiji military. His wrath focused particularly on the use of the Compulsory Supervision Order to effect early release of prisoners convicted for their role in the mutiny in November 2000 in which several loyal soldiers lost their lives and that nearly claimed the life of Bainimarama himself. He was angry, too, at the prospect of facing a reduction in the size of the top-heavy military force recommended in a White Paper commissioned by the government. There were also issues surrounding the length and duration of Bainimarama's contract. Deep personal animosity between military commander and prime minister did not help. For these and other reasons, Bainimarama unleashed his coup on 5 December 2006.

Fijian anger at the overthrow of a Fijian government, elected with overwhelming indigenous Fijian support, was understandable. No one had ever contemplated the possibility of a Fijian military confronting a Fijian government, or the unceremonious humbling and humiliation of the central institutions of Fijian society, the Great Council of Chiefs and the Methodist Church. The reaction of the Indo-Fijian community was revealing. In 1987 and in 2000, there had been immediate outrage: strikes were threatened or mounted, trade unions mobilized, international sanctions sought. But there was none of that in 2006. There were many reasons. To begin with, there was the nature of the 2006 coup itself. This must have been one of the most advertised coups in the history of the world, announced

several years before it actually materialized: a coup by hemorrhage. When the denouement finally came, it was received not so much with surprise as with relief that the deed was finally done. It was not a coup, Bainimarama said; it was a “Cleanup Campaign.” The catchphrase caught on; it resonated in the experience of many who had witnessed or been victims of burgeoning bribery and corruption in Fiji. “Baksheesh” (payment to expedite service) was fast becoming a way of life in the country. Reports of government largesse being channeled to constituents for political, vote-buying purposes were well known. Many genuinely believed that Bainimarama meant business when he promised to halt the looting of the public purse for political purposes.

A new dimension to Indo-Fijian thinking was added in January 2007 when Labour leader Mahendra Chaudhry joined the military administration as its finance minister. Many in Fiji believe that Chaudhry was in on the game from the very beginning, a charge he denies vehemently, and for which he must be taken at his word. Nonetheless, throughout the steadily building crisis, Chaudhry was quietly seeking audience with Bainimarama after hours, keeping his powder dry, keeping abreast of the latest developments, and taking every opportunity to criticize the Qarase government and his own ministers in it. Perhaps, like Bainimarama, Chaudhry too was haunted by a past that had denied him his just due, and he was determined not to forgive his enemies. Chaudhry was the leader of the Indo-Fijian community and many, for that reason alone, followed his lead. There were other Indo-Fijian leaders—like those of the National Federation Party, for instance—who opposed the coup, but theirs was a minority voice. Perhaps Chaudhry thought he might be able to use his vast political experience to steer the novices in the military regime in a desirable direction, the tail that might wag the dog, but in this view he was seriously mistaken. A year later, he was unceremoniously dumped from the military cabinet, but by then the damage brought about by his involvement had been done. Chaudhry’s participation had given the military regime a certain cloak of much-needed legitimacy at a time when it mattered most. Bainimarama had been able to buy valuable time to consolidate power and fend off criticism at home and from abroad. Chaudhry now finds himself hobbled on the margins, taking occasional potshots at various government policies from his website. His once strongly organized community is similarly disabled.

The Indo-Fijian business community switched sides in quick time, which comes as no surprise. When the coup took place, many were heard to say

that the country would bounce back to normalcy within six months. It did not, which forced them to take a longer-term view of things, including the need to court elements of the military. Some supported the new regime because of their experience with corruption in the previous administrations, but for many, making money was their main priority, the end that could justify any means. The authoritarian environment suited their purpose. Some are known to have direct access to the members of the shadowy Military Council. The commitment of the business community to Fiji is suspect. It has been so for a while. Many have moved their nest eggs safely elsewhere, to Australia and New Zealand, where many also have permanent residence. Businessmen with conscience and commitment have been rare in Fiji.

More surprising has been the reaction of the Indo-Fijian moral community. After the obligatory disapproving tones, many Indo-Fijian religious leaders quickly fell in line. The head of the largest Hindu organization in Fiji, the Sanatan Dharam Pritinidhi Sabha of Fiji, declared quiet support for the stated goals of the coup. The acting president of the Arya Samaj, the wife of a high court judge, joined the military administration's National Council for Building a Better Fiji and urged an understanding of the military regime's plans for Fiji. From western Viti Levu, Swani Maharaj, a perennially changeable politician and member of several political parties in the past, gave similar assurances of support. The South Indian cultural organization Sangam expressed opposition, while the Fiji Muslim League, whose leaders were close to the Qarase administration, maintained strategic silence. But the overall narrative was of compliance.

A part of the reason for the support was pragmatic. There were personal business interests to consider. The regime in power had to be courted to receive special grants and other favors for schools and community projects, because it looked likely that the regime would remain in power for longer than originally thought. But other important reasons for supporting the regime were grievance and grudge. People remembered the excesses of the Sunday Ban of the late 1980s, the mindless acts of religious vandalism, and the burning of mosques and temples and other places of worship with the support of the leaders of the Methodist Church—the Reverend Tomasi Raikivi, the Reverend Manasa Lasaro, and the Reverend Viliame Gonelevu, to mention just three. For this reason, many welcomed Bainimarama's punitive approach toward the Methodist Church leaders. It was the same with the humbling and humiliation of the Great Council of Chiefs, which had supported coups in the past and which many thought

was anachronistic in the modern era. Why should this body alone decide who should be the president and vice president of Fiji?

In the past, academics and tertiary students played a prominent role in rallying public opinion against the coups, but now, with one or two notable exceptions, they took a backseat. In the early days, many of them were seduced by the “Cleanup Campaign” message, their strategic silence quietly encouraged by the leadership of these institutions of higher learning fearing reprisals, if nothing else. Many actually believed in the possibility of the Bainimarama coup being a good coup, a means to an end, the end being the creation of a better-governed, race-neutral society. They were prepared to give the new regime the benefit of the doubt over Laisenia Qarase and Mahendra Chaudhry, two old practitioners of race-based politics. A focus on personalities detracted the fundamental principles at stake: a military coup had deposed a democratically elected government. Qarase and Chaudhry might fall under the proverbial bus tomorrow, but the sanctity of the ballot box must be guarded at all times. Others offered old, tired, extra-constitutional justifications, such as the need sometimes to go outside the law to protect it. Students took their cue from their teachers. Their apparent indifference and apathy was dismaying, their involvement in the great issues of governance almost nonexistent. Perhaps many were simply focused on acquiring the right qualifications to emigrate. Others saw opportunities for themselves and thought it undesirable to “rock the boat.” Edward Said’s words are apposite: “You do not want to appear too political; you are afraid of seeming controversial; you need the approval of a boss or an authority figure; you want to have a reputation for being balanced, objective, moderate; your hope is to be asked back, to consult, to be on a board or prestigious committee, and so remain within the responsible mainstream; someday you hope to get an honorary degree, a big prize, perhaps even an ambassadorship” (1994, 100–101). Said also wrote, “If anything can denature, neutralize, and finally kill a passionate intellectual life it is the internalization of such habits” (1994, 74).

Unexpected support for the coup came from Fiji’s émigré community, particularly from retired Indo-Fijian expatriates. Many had left Fiji, or had been forced to leave it, in singularly unfortunate circumstances in the late 1980s; some were summarily dismissed for suspected harboring of pro-coalition sympathies. Now in their retirement, they wanted to return to help set things right, to make Fiji a true, nonracial democracy, albeit while receiving exorbitant consultants’ salaries, almost obscene by local standards. Some were clearly opportunistic, yearning for a brief moment

in the sun before the inevitable twilight. But there were also among them technocratic ideologues with little confidence in the institutions and practices of electoral politics to deliver desired outcomes. They had no time for wicked politicians who played the race card to win elections. Voters could not be trusted to know what was in their own best interests. Elections were problematic, low voter turnout endemic in developing countries, corruption and scandals rampant, and alienation of people from the processes of governance growing, leading to the conclusion that democracy may not be the most appropriate form of government for all societies. They therefore threw their weight behind the so-called “Peoples Charter,” a document full of motherhood statements lifted straight from a Good Governance 101 course, to put the country onto autopilot, leaving elected politicians only to dot the i’s and cross the t’s. The charter has now become the military regime’s roadmap, its foundational document, but it is honored more in the breach as the regime tramples on principles of natural justice and basic human rights in order to entrench itself. Charter supporters are caught in a bind: they can neither condone the excesses of the regime that their participation helped to legitimize nor condemn it outright. Like most Indo-Fijians, they too are caught in a cul-de-sac.

Some responses are easily categorized, but others are not. Many Indo-Fijians, perhaps the majority, have no view either way. Their standard of life has not changed much at all since 2006; quite the contrary, they live precariously on the charity and sufferance of others. People who have endured enough upheaval in their lives for the last two decades hope that this too will pass soon so that they can get on with their lives. It is resignation borne not of indifference or fatalism but of experience of an endless cycle of promises made and broken. I should at this point declare my own hand. I have been a strong opponent of military coups in Fiji. I was as opposed to them in 1987 as I was in 2006. For me, there is something deeply immoral (quite apart from being illegal) about overturning the verdict of the ballot box with the bayonet. The history of the world shows that coups don’t solve problems, they merely compound them. Violence as an instrument of policy is always counterproductive. And I believe deeply that the intellectual classes (but not they alone) have the sacred responsibility to speak truth to power. If we don’t, who will? I did that in my own small way, speaking and writing against coups and their consequences for Fiji, and I have paid the price. I was interrogated by the military in November 2009 and expelled from the country, the land of my birth. I have no rancor or bitterness: if that is the price that had to be paid for

standing up for the values of democracy and the rule of law, then I am glad I paid it.

Five years after the 2006 coup, the Indo-Fijian community, diminished and demoralized, is caught between a rock and a hard place. The rhetoric providing the initial justification for the coup rings hollow now. The “Cleanup Campaign” has yielded few results except more embarrassment for the military regime and its bungling Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption (headed by a serving military officer). Like the Qarase administration, the military regime too has used the Compulsory Supervision Order to effect early release from prison of people convicted for various coup-related crimes, including manslaughter of civilians, thus denting its claims of moral superiority over the regime it deposed. It is now clear that the military will only countenance a new political order in which it has a visible and permanent presence. A militarized democracy is in the offing. Burma as a comparison comes to mind. There are many Indo-Fijians who, having supported the coup thus far, feel that there can be no turning back. They have burned their bridges with the Fijian community. They know that they are seen by others, fairly or unfairly, as aiding and abetting the coup through various acts of omission or commission. If the coup fails, they know they are done for, and so out of desperate necessity they back Bainimarama because they know that he is the only one who stands between them and anarchy. Indeed, some are beginning to embrace him as their real leader, rather than Mahendra Chaudhry or anyone else.

The impulses underlying this kind of thinking are understandable but wrongheaded and in truth counterproductive. Rhetoric of non-racialism aside, the Bainimarama coup is morphing into a “Fijian” coup as many Fijians take up opportunities left by the departing Indo-Fijians and as province after province lines up to “apologize” to Bainimarama for opposing his regime. The presence in the interim administration of such notable former coup supporters and members of the hard-line Taukei Movement as Inoke Kubuabola and Filipe Bole is reassuring to them. Bainimarama has vowed not to allow 1987-era politicians to stand for elections in the future and yet has rewarded two of them with senior positions in his administration. There is talk of nonracial equality, but not a word has been said about opening up the almost racially exclusive military to non-Fijians. The ethnic imbalance in the public sector is glaring. Military personnel increasingly take up senior civilian positions. Commodore Bainimarama promises to address the perennial land-lease problem by making available unused Fijian land on ninety-nine year leases for agricultural pur-

poses. It sounds an attractive proposition on paper, but it is like locking the gate after the horse has already bolted. The sugar industry is dying and no amount of artificial resuscitation will revive it. Places in northern Vanua Levu—Wainikoro, Lagalaga, Naqiqi, Coqeloa—are emptying at a depressingly rapid rate as people move into the congested squatter settlements, principally in the Suva-Nausori corridor where an estimated one third of the total population now lives, often in wretched conditions. Yet those displaced from the farming country say they will never return to the perpetual uncertainties of the past. The umbilical cord is severed for good. Many are contemplating an overseas future for their children.

For the Indo-Fijians, as indeed for Fiji as a whole, the last forty years have been a time of frustration and bewilderment, the promise of independence having gone awry. A large part of the problem lay with the architecture of the independence political order itself. It was constructed on the pillars of ethnic compartmentalization, while, with time and with the advent of new forces of change, “race” largely lost its relevance in daily life to all but the leaders who continued to embrace it as “a fact of life.” When power was finally wrested from the ruling elite at the ballot box, the military was unleashed to win it back. In a strange twist of irony, the military, which was nurtured as the ultimate bastion of power for the Fijian establishment, returned in 2006 to destroy its very foundations. It now looks unlikely that it will ever completely disappear from the political scene. Power concedes nothing without a struggle, and once out, soldiers do not voluntarily return to the barracks. The intense and deeply felt debates over the last forty years about strengthening the institutions of parliamentary democracy—electoral systems, political parties, constitutional protection of rights, institutional mechanisms for strengthening the participation of citizens in the governance of the country—seem in the end to have been a wasted effort. There is poignant irony in the fact that a community committed broadly to a nonviolent, Gandhian approach to politics, and that itself had been a victim of coups in the past, now endorses, however indirectly or tangentially, violence as an instrument of public policy in the desperate hope of a better outcome.

The Indo-Fijian community itself has changed almost beyond recognition in the last forty years. The self-contained, self-sustaining rural community built around the sugar industry is uprooted and adrift. The settlements in the cane areas that once hummed with life—local sports competitions, festivals, and festivities—now look empty and forlorn. The land has ceased to be the sole source of livelihood for most families, includ-



ing my own. Villages are now essentially residential sites. There is a deep yearning among most young people still stranded in rural areas to leave for someplace else. The rapid transformation of the rural scene is eroding a culture and a way of life that once formed the bedrock of Indo-Fijian society and provided a direct link to its foundational past. Cut from its cultural moorings, with declining support and sustenance from its roots, the community is vulnerable, much more at the mercy of forces of change beyond its control. It is, in truth, living on the sufferance of others. In the early 1970s, migration would have appeared a very distant prospect for most Indo-Fijians. It was something that only the wealthy and the well connected might contemplate. It is a daily occurrence now, uppermost in the minds of most people, if not for themselves then certainly for their children. The community is emotionally uprooted. It is often said with some truth that there is hardly a single Indo-Fijian family in Fiji that does not have at least one member abroad. The emotional center of gravity has shifted. Perhaps in time, "From Immigration to Emigration" will become the dominant narrative in the overall experience of the Indo-Fijian community, its Fiji sojourn a momentary stopover in the life of a people condemned by fate to scatter around the world. But by then, people of my generation will have moved on. In the words of John Dryden:

Not Heav'n itself upon the past  
Has pow'r  
But what has been has been, and I  
Have had my hour

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### *Abstract*

Fiji's postcolonial journey has been fraught. The promise of prosperity and political stability, high at the time of independence in 1970, dissipated soon afterward as the politics of ethnicity came to the fore and as disagreements developed among indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians about the nature and direction of public policy. A military coup in 1987 removed a democratically elected government, but instead of ensuring the entrenchment of Fijian political control, it unleashed forces whose ultimate effect was the undermining of Fijian political unity. Commodore Frank Bainimarama's coup in 2006 removed from power an indigenous Fijian-led government, promising in the process to overturn the assumptions and understandings about power sharing that underpinned the understandings and assumptions that were embedded in the Independence constitution and to lead the country towards a non-racial future. The reaction to the latest coup from Fiji's different communities remains a matter of intense debate in the country.

KEYWORDS: Fiji, independence, military coup, land problems, emigration, Fijian diaspora, constitution making